



The Poisoned Poor: Toxic Chemicals Exposures in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

Toxic chemicals from industry and mining affect the health of hundreds of millions of people in low- and middle-income countries. Heavy metals, pesticides, solvents, radionuclides and other toxic substances can be found at dangerous levels at thousands of sites around the world, in drinking water, soil, air and food. These chemicals (lead, mercury, chromium, and cadmium, etc.) affect local populations in the poorest towns and neighborhoods, especially children.

A recent study of more than 3,000 toxic sites, funded by the World Bank, European Commission and Asian Development Bank, shows that as many as 200 million people may be affected. A detailed analysis of 373 contaminated sites in India, Indonesia and the Philippines calculated that the amount of disease caused by toxic exposures was similar to that of malaria or outdoor air pollution in those three countries. The impact of these diseases, and the commensurate loss in economic capacity, is enormous.

The majority of acutely toxic sites are caused by local business, many of them artisanal or small-scale.

- Toxic chemicals from industry and mining affect as many as 200 million people
- Health problems are as large as malaria*
- Children are especially affected
- Solutions are do-able and affordable

Abandoned sites are also quite common. Surprisingly, international companies are rarely implicated.

Interventions to mitigate these toxic exposures while protecting livelihoods have proven to be manageable, cost-effective, and eminently do-able. Projects in a number of countries, as well as by international agencies such as World Bank, UNIDO and Blacksmith Institute, have produced cost-effective solutions for a wide range of toxics issues.

Aside from the obvious health benefits, solving these problems usually promotes, rather than inhibits, economic growth. Solutions can increase access to valuable resources, such as more efficient recovery of lead from battery recycling, or reclamation of land in urban areas. Technical solutions that offer more profit to small-scale players through improved, toxic-free technology transfer can contribute both to sustainable development and poverty reduction. No less important, enacting solutions now can avoid longer-term economic constraints, such as mental disability and cognitive impairment of children and rising health care costs from illnesses associated with toxic exposures.

The new Global Alliance on Health and Pollution (GAHP) offers technical expertise, guidance and resources to help low- and middle-income countries clean up chemicals and wastes legacy toxic hotspots, prevent re-contamination and guard against future pollution.

* In countries studied to date.